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ABSTRACT

Effective student-centered writing instruction is the subject of this two-part report concerning the South Mississippi Writing Project, a cooperative effort between local public schools and the University of Southern Mississippi. The project was designed to combat illiteracy by providing teachers new tools for teaching writing, thereby improving student writing abilities. First, the report presents a description of a staff development program that utilizes student-centered instruction to train teachers to teach writing, and next, a teacher reports on the effectiveness of student-centered instruction for her personally and the resulting effect on the writing abilities of her students in a fourth-grade public school. (NH)

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The South Mississippi Writing Project: An Effective Staff Development Program for Fighting Illiteracy in Mississippi

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Running Head: Fighting Illiteracy in Mississippi

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ABSTRACT

This report describes and assesses the learning experience on two levels: a fourth-grade teacher who participated in an innovative staff development program at the University of Southern Mississippi during the summer of 1986; and the resulting effect on the learning experiences of her fourth-grade students during the 1986-87 academic year. The South Mississippi Writing Project, a cooperative effort between local public schools and the University of Southern Mississippi, is seen as an effective model of student-centered writing instruction that combats illiteracy by providing teachers new tools for teaching writing, thereby improving student writing abilities.

INTRODUCTION

This report contains two parts: a description of an innovative staff development program that utilizes student-centered instruction to train teachers to teach writing; and a first-person report from a teacher about the effectiveness of student-centered instruction on her own learning and the resulting effect on the writing abilities of her students in a fourth-grade public school.

The South Mississippi Writing Project is a member of the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Consortium and is affiliated with the National Writing Project.

BACKGROUND

When the superintendents of four local school districts requested an innovative staff development program in writing instruction, the USM administration responded, and the resulting program--the South Mississippi Writing Project--was created through the cooperation of the four school systems, the College of Education and Psychology, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Division of Life Long Learning.

The South Mississippi Writing Project is a blend of cooperation across a the campus of a large, diverse university. Innovative, student-centered staff development at the University of Southern Mississippi is staff development at its best because it is practical, productive, and promising. Student-centered

instruction works for teachers in staff development and it works for students in the public schools.

The program of the South Mississippi Writing Project includes a Summer Institute to train teachers to teach writing effectively. Then, in a collaborative effort between school districts and the University, the summer participants best qualified to work with other teachers conduct staff development programs. The program is based on the assumptions of the Bay Area Writing Project:

1] The writing problem affects both the universities and the schools. This common problem can best be solved through cooperatively planned university-school programs.

2] Student writing can be improved by improving the teaching of writing, and the best teacher of teachers is another teacher.

3] Change can best be accomplished by those who work in the schools, not by transient consultants who briefly appear, never to be seen again, and not by packets of teacher-proof materials.

4] Programs designed to improve the teaching of writing should involve teachers at all grade levels and from all subject areas.

5] Teachers of writing must write themselves.

--James Gray

THE NEED IMPROVED WRITING INSTRUCTION

Nearly 29% of 11th graders in Mississippi failed the state wide functional literacy test in 1987. That is, 29% of Mississippi's eleventh graders can not read or write well enough to fill in a job application. Many of them will graduate from high school to unemployment. Many will be under-employed and underchallenged and underfed. Many will be hungry and poor. A few may achieve some success affluent because they will invent ways to get by without knowing how to read and write. But they will remain uninvolved in national issues, not because they are unintelligent, not because they are disinterested, but because they are isolated by their illiteracy and unable to cope with a print-oriented society.

Several years ago, residents of Hattiesburg were concerned about the possible storage of nuclear waste in salt domes nearby. People who couldn't read for themselves about the dangers involved had to rely on others--primarily local television journalists--for information about the storage decisions. Unless people in Mississippi can write their state legislators and Congress persuasive letters about this and other critical issues, the people of Mississippi may have no voice in the government's choice of waste sites and in other critical issues. In Mississippi and in any city, town and village around the world the illiterate are cut out of the decision processes because they cannot read or write adequately, not because they are unintelligent. Illiteracy keeps intelligent people ignorant and

that ignorance fosters isolation from society and dependence on the government and its institutions. The knowledge and power gained through higher order thinking, that is, through reading and writing allow us to become involved in our society, not isolated from it, and independent of institutions and agencies, not dependent on them.

AN EFFECTIVE STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN WRITING

To combat this problem the South Mississippi Writing Project, with cooperation and support from the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Consortium, emphasizes writing as a way of thinking, as a way of learning. One objective of the SMWP is to change the way teachers and students think about writing. Writing is a process that integrates all of the thinking processes; therefore it is essential to education and to a free society. This emphasis on thinking and freedom is fundamental to a student-centered pedagogy.

The program is designed to debunk myths about writing, improve the quality and quantity of teacher-writing, and model student-centered instruction in writing.

Frank Smith demythologized the teaching and learning of writing [Language Arts, 58 (October 1981), 792-798] by delineating a number of myths--Smith's myths--about writing. First on Smith's list of myths is that writing is for the transmission of information. The reality that is overlooked, Smith says, is that two major functions of writing are to create

experiences and to explore ideas. The transmission of information view focuses on what is written (often on the mechanics of what is written) instead of focusing on the developing thought of the writer.

This myth about the nature of writing is giving way to a more informed view of writing, one that sees writing as a process of thinking rather than as a quantifiable product. Writing is more than speech plus handwriting, spelling and punctuation. It is more than transcription of thought; it is thinking.

Another myth Smith attempts to dispel is that a writer is a special kind of person. The truth is that there is "no evidence that writers are any more intelligent, sensitive, talented, dedicated, disciplined, or persevering than people who do not write. Writers come from no exclusive kind of background...There is only one difference between writers and people who do not write -- writers write."

The myths about writing are as numerous as myths and legends of the Middle Ages. But there is a grand myth about writing that a staff development program in Southern Mississippi is designed to eliminate. That myth is, as Smith says, people who do not themselves enjoy and practice writing can teach children how to write. The reality is that "anyone who hopes to teach children how to write must demonstrate what writing does and demonstrate how to do it."

How well is this innovative, student-centered continuing education program working in Southern Mississippi? As the

remainder of this report indicates, a teacher who was ready to throw up her arms in despair found renewal of purpose and pedagogy. But she found more than renewal; she found that she could write, that her students could write, and that she could conduct classroom-based research to evaluate and guide her teaching. Hear, in her own voice, a teacher's view of the writing project.

A FOURTH-GRADE TEACHER'S VIEW

Literacy is the major problem in this state in my estimation. The goal of every person in education should be for each student to be able to read and write proficiently. However, this cannot be accomplished through basic skills tests, teacher evaluation, or machines, but through the reeducation of our teachers.

For several years as a teacher, I have noticed poor thinking-writing skills as a weak link in our educational system. Many elementary teachers realize this and have said that writing should be one of the top priorities of staff development. These teachers, as I, were not trained to implement the writing process in our classrooms.

My undergraduate and graduate studies in the sixties and early seventies emphasized reading, math, and science but not one stressed writing. In the last few years, I have been reading the research concerning learning and thinking through writing. The work by the Bay Area Writing Project and the National Writing

Project seemed to make the most sense. I tried to implement some of these ideas into my classroom but still I was not satisfied.

In fact, I was discouraged with the whole teaching profession. Basic skills, computer testing, and mastery learning mandated by the State Department of Education were not allowing the students to develop thinking-writing skills. The amount of paper work required has also increased tremendously in the last few years and I do not have an assistant or secretary. I was at the point of finding another profession.

But in April, 1986, my principal nominated me as a Fellow in the South Mississippi Writing Institute because of my interest in writing. When I accepted and began the summer program, I wondered if I belonged in the group. There were many high school teachers and some teaching on the junior-college level in the project. I had been associated with fourth graders for almost twenty years and almost did not know how to act with people over nine or ten years old.

In addition, this graduate course was certainly different from any others I had taken. All the rest had been teacher-centered; that is, the teacher lectured and the students took notes and tests. This particular course was student-centered; we were active learners rather than receivers of information.

I must admit that I have never worked as hard in my schooling as I did last summer. In addition to writing every day, we participated in response groups, listening to each other's writing and working on revision. Teachers presented

lessons that were effective ways of using writing as a learning device. Guest speakers and discussions were related to various aspects of the writing process. In addition, we read and discussed extensively the latest research in composition.

With this newfound knowledge and training in skills, I was more confident in my own writing and my ability to teach writing when school began in the fall. Keeping in mind that teachers should be writers and writing should be done daily, the students and I each kept a freewriting journal in which we wrote every morning for five minutes.

In addition to the freewriting activity, we each had a writing folder. In these writing folders, we kept a list of ideas that we wanted to write about and simply began writing. During this thirty-minute writing period, I also wrote; I was part of the group. I told the students that in our writing we were mainly concerned about what we were saying at the beginning of the writing process instead of spelling or punctuation. I shared with the class what I had written, allowing them to be my response group. I asked them questions, such as "Do you understand what I mean in that paragraph?" or "What's another word I could use instead of run which would sound better?"

In order for me to conference with each student once a week, five short individual conferences were scheduled each day during this thirty-minute time limit. During an individual conference, the student read one of his rough drafts, and together the student and I talked about what had been written, again

emphasizing content, rather than mechanics.

When I felt the students were ready, I began modified response groups for five minutes a week, letting students pick a partner and read to each from their folders. This was an enjoyable experience and a means of publishing without worrying about the surface errors. During the last two or three months of the school year, many were ready to share with the whole class or even with the other fourth-grade classes by reading something they had written.

Because teaching quotation marks had always been a difficult topic to teach, this year I decided to change my approach by asking each student to tell me one sentence he said over the weekend. Through these sentences, the student formulated the rules for punctuating conversation. Never have I seen students so excited about writing conversation.

During the year, the students became involved with other authors. In their letter to Robert Burch, an author of children's books, and in the visit by David Crim, an author of youth material for the Southern Baptist Convention, the students discussed intelligently the authors' writings and the writing process. They were also eager to share their own writings with these authors. Also when I read books orally to them, this group noticed the ways the authors phrased different sentences and passages.

As a culminating activity, each person in the class chose one story he had written to submit to our anthology for the year.

The students did not mind revising their text, or writing, but hated the editing part concerning grammatical errors and despised writing that final copy for the anthology.

At the end of the year, I formulated an evaluation covering the most important aspects of the writing process. When I administered it, the feedback was almost one hundred per cent successful. I felt the wording of the sentences in the evaluation was the cause of an occasional error on the part of the students.

During the year, I actively worked as a writing teacher consultant, working with teachers in staff development. In addition, I spoke with the curriculum supervisors in the Natchez-Adams County School District about implementing writing in their staff development program. I also met with the chair of each department and other officials at Alcorn State University about beginning a writing site there for the teachers in that area. I also presented programs for faculty meetings, teaching sororities, and other organizations about the advantages and uses of writing in the classroom. The main question I was asked again and again was, "Is it working in the classroom?" My answer was always an emphatic yes!

Student success in my classroom encouraged me to be involved in the latest developments and classroom-based research in the field of writing. I willingly participated in the second institute at Southern this summer because I felt a need to work on my own writing and to receive feedback from others, my

response group. To learn a variety of successful activities in hands across the curriculum was another reason I participated. But by far, seeing students write has been my greatest goal.

Many of my teacher friends have been very discouraged and some have left the profession. Because of the South Mississippi Project and the success of my students this year, I have made my decision to stay in the teaching profession.

CONCLUSION

The South Mississippi Writing Project, one of the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Consortium sites, is improving the teaching of writing in Mississippi through student-centered staff development in the writing process. The South Mississippi Writing Project is shown to be an effective staff development program because of increased student understanding of writing and improved writing skills of fourth graders. While no massive evaluation has been conducted, the effects on the students of one fourth-grade teacher are impressive. So far, the program appears to be a very effective approach to combatting the illiteracy problem in Mississippi.